

CHAPTER 8

SOFT NEWS AND THE FOUR OPRAH EFFECTS

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INTRODUCTION

ON September 21, 2009, President Barack Obama took to the stage of the *Late Show with David Letterman*, only the second time a sitting US president had appeared on a network late night comedy show.¹ This appearance—Obama's sixth on *Letterman*—capped an intensive media push by the President to promote health care reform, including interviews on five Sunday news shows the previous day. The interview addressed a variety of topics, ranging from the state of the economy to the war in Afghanistan, as well as how the President's children were adjusting to life in the White House.

Why would a sitting president add a late night comedy-oriented talk show to his already crowded weekend itinerary of five appearances on traditional news and interview shows? One obvious answer concerns the audience magnitude: nearly 7.2 million Americans watched the President on *Letterman*. Only 3.1 million watched Obama's interview the day before on ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*.

A second, less obvious answer concerns the *nature* of Letterman's audience. Compared to the typical audience for traditional news and interview programs, Letterman's audience is less politically engaged, ideologically extreme, or partisan (Baum 2003a, 2005; Baum and Jamison 2006). Consequently, Letterman's viewers are more likely to

¹ Obama also made the *first* such appearance, on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, six months earlier, on March 18, 2009.

be persuaded by a presidential appeal than the relatively more partisan and ideological audiences of typical traditional news outlets (Zaller 1992).

Finally, such interviews present candidates in a more favorable light than traditional political interview shows. For example, commenting on another 2008 presidential candidate's talk show appearances, Gold (2007) observes, "John and Elizabeth Edwards got substantially gentler treatment from Leno on 'The Tonight Show' than they did from Katie Couric on '60 Minutes.'" In short, late night entertainment talk shows or other soft news programs afford politicians one of their best opportunities to reach a large group of potentially persuadable voters in a relatively sympathetic venue.

If the combination of audience size, demographics, and anticipated interview content accounts for Obama's interest in appearing six times on Letterman, as well as on other decidedly non-political programs, such as the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The View*, and the *Tyra Banks Show*, it does not tell us what viewers take away from these appearances. The increasing frequency of presidential candidate appearances on daytime and late night talk shows (Baum 2003a, 2005; Gold 2007) strongly suggests they believe such appearances are politically beneficial. Are they correct? What do viewers learn, and with what effects? These are the primary topics of the present chapter.

Numerous scholars (for example, Patterson 1994, 2000; Bennett 2003) and journalists (for example, Jones 2009) have decried what they consider the increasingly bleak state of political news, and its implications for the capacity of voters to fulfill their basic responsibilities as democratic citizens. Proponents of this perspective—termed *participatory democratic theory* by Clawson and Oxley (2008)—frequently cite the proliferation of soft news as evidence of the news media's failure to equip citizens with proper or sufficient information. Patterson (2000), for instance, implicitly argues that hard news—defined as coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life—is of higher quality than soft news, which lacks a public policy component, featuring instead human interest themes and dramatic subject matter. As Zaller (2003: 129) states, "soft news is information that is either personally useful or merely entertaining." In short, a prevalent scholarly critique is that the contemporary news media offer too little hard news and too much soft news, thereby making it difficult for citizens to obtain sufficient information to make informed vote choices.²

But could soft news shows help citizens better perform their democratic responsibilities? Stated differently: is there an *Oprah Effect* and if so, what is it? Or is there, perhaps, more than one such effect? In fact, scholars investigating this question have identified and begun to grapple with at least four distinct categories of potential soft news effects on consumers. These include effects on *attention* to and *knowledge* about politics, as well as political *attitudes*, and *behavior*. Numerous studies find what might be termed Oprah Effects that fit into more than one of these categories, and they are by no means absolute. Nonetheless, we employ this schema to enhance analytic clarity and to provide a framework for integrating the growing literature on the political

² The distinction between hard and soft news in the academic literature appears to date back to Tuchman's (1973) sociological investigation of newsroom values.

implications of soft news. Viewing the large quantity of literature through this schema also reveals that as the size and complexity of the soft news market increase, a second effective distinction is emerging—between more traditional soft news talk programs such as *The View* or the *Late Show with David Letterman*, and explicitly satirical comedy productions hosted by dramatic characters, particularly Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

The remainder of this chapter reviews the literature in each of these four categories, drawing linkages between several of them, as well as assessing their implications for the behavior of and policies provided by politicians. We conclude by suggesting directions for future research.

FOUR OPRAH EFFECTS

Baum and Jamison (2006) define the Oprah Effect as the influence of consuming soft news political content on vote choice. Yet it is possible to conceptualize the Oprah Effect from the perspective of either the suppliers or the consumers of political information. As the introduction makes clear, the two are intimately related. Absent citizen interest (the demand side), it is unclear why politicians would bother tailoring their appeals to soft news formats. It is also possible to conceptualize the Oprah Effect in terms of influence on public policy outcomes. After all, changes in the tenor of political discourse could lead to consequential changes in the substance, rather than merely the style, of politics (Popkin 2006; Baum 2007). Consequently, in the final substantive section we assess research into the supply side. However, in order to anticipate likely supply-side effects, it is first necessary to explicate the demand side. In other words, to assess how politicians may adapt their behavior or policy agendas as a consequence of soft news coverage of politics, one must first determine how consuming political information via soft news affects citizens. Therefore, we now discuss each of the four potential demand-side political effects of soft news.

Attention

Basic attentiveness to political information is arguably the lowest threshold of learning of the four Oprah Effects. Baum (2002, 2003a) characterizes attentiveness as a precursor to knowledge or understanding, making attention an important element of political learning. He reports evidence from a variety of public opinion surveys suggesting that politically unengaged individuals who consume soft news are more attentive to major political events than their counterparts who do not consume soft news. Conversely, consuming soft news does not influence highly politically engaged individuals. Baum explicates an *incidental by-product* model, which holds that soft news makes political information accessible (that is, interesting and entertaining) for politically inattentive

individuals, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will attend to it if exposed. In essence, soft news “piggybacks” substantive political news to information consumed for purposes of entertainment.

Additional research supports this contention. For instance, Van Zoonen et al. (2007) find that “infotainment”—operationalized as appearances by presidential candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry on the *Dr. Phil Show*—does enhance viewers’ overall attention to politics. Yet, based on a qualitative analysis, they report that viewers of these candidate interviews were even *more* attentive to non-political subjects like seating arrangements, body language, and candidates’ physical appearance. This suggests that the political-attentiveness-enhancing effects of watching political candidates on entertainment-oriented talk shows may be somewhat limited.

Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) find, consistent with Baum, that exposure to political humor on late night comedy shows enhances political engagement. However, contrary to Baum’s findings, they argue that such effects are limited to viewers with sufficient political sophistication to “get the joke.”

This is an area in the literature where potentially important differences between soft news programs are increasingly apparent. This seeming discrepancy stems from differences in content across soft-news-oriented outlets, a distinction Moy, Xenos, and Hess (2005) emphasize. Some outlets, like the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (henceforth the *Daily Show*) or the *Colbert Report*, offer relatively sophisticated satire clearly aimed at politically attentive consumers, while others, including most daytime talk shows (e.g., *The View*) and some late night talk shows (e.g., the *Tonight Show*) and entertainment news magazine shows (e.g., *Entertainment Tonight*), target less politically sophisticated audiences. It thus seems reasonable to presume, and is largely consistent with the findings of both Baum and Moy, Xenos, and Hess, that beneficial attentiveness or engagement effects among politically unsophisticated audiences would be strongest for venues that do not assume high levels of political knowledge.

The previous discussion illustrates the importance of drawing clear distinctions between different types of media outlets and content aimed at distinct audiences. Most research into the effects of soft news on public opinion finds any such effects to be contingent on media venue, topic, and audience characteristics. Such venues vary in the sophistication of their content and hence the likely learning effects among different types of viewers, while some issues are more easily framed in accessible terms than others. Moreover, different types of viewers differ in their propensity to learn about politics via such outlets. Scholars have only partially disentangled these distinctions. Much of the research in this area thus suffers from imprecise definitions of the independent (soft news exposure) and/or dependent (public opinion) variables.

Knowledge

Communication scholars (Blumler and McQuail 1969; Wamsley and Pride 1972; Fitzsimmons and Osburn 1968; Robinson 1974) have shown that television allows

individuals to learn passively, even if they are neither interested in a topic nor motivated to learn about it. This is possible because individuals are more likely to accept information presented in a non-conflictual manner that does not arouse excitement (Krugman and Hartley 1970). Television arguably represents the ideal instrument of passive learning. Individuals learn passively by first choosing to expose themselves to some type of information, such as network television news, and then surrendering control of the specific information to which they are exposed (Zukin and Snyder 1984). TV watchers can thereby gain knowledge via consuming television, without necessarily intending to do so.

More recently, Popkin (1993) extended the conceptualization of passive learning to explicate a by-product theory of political knowledge. He argues that individuals learn about politics through everyday experiences having little direct connection with politics. Passive learning incidental to seeking entertainment via soft news could allow consumers to gain political knowledge, even without their intending to do so (Baum 2003a).

Political communication scholars have sought to determine more precisely *what* political knowledge consumers glean from soft news and *who* is most likely to gain it. This has produced a schism between those arguing that consuming soft news produces relatively limited political knowledge gain, primarily among individuals who might not otherwise gain such information, and others arguing that soft news has little political informational value. In the former camp, some argue that soft news can facilitate political learning either directly, via exposure to substantive information in soft news venues (Baum 2003a, 2003b; Brewer and Cao 2006), or indirectly, through a gateway effect, whereby exposure to small amounts of information on soft news outlets motivates viewers to consume additional related information via traditional news venues (Baum 2003a; Young and Tisinger 2006). In both cases, political learning effects appear strongest among individuals who are relatively uninterested in, and hence unmotivated to learn about, politics.

In the latter camp, some scholars, notably Markus Prior (2003, 2005, 2007), have argued that consuming soft news does not contribute to consequential gains in political knowledge. Prior does not dispute that soft news programs cover political issues. Instead, he challenges Baum's (2002, 2003a) contention that consequential numbers of consumers learn about politics from such shows. He argues (2005) that extreme media fragmentation in recent years has reduced incidental exposure to politics among entertainment-seeking viewers. The reason is that viewers who prefer entertainment to news are increasingly able to avoid the latter. As evidence, Prior conducted a series of survey experiments in which he found that individuals who claim to prefer soft news to political news programs typically gain at most sporadic factual knowledge about a variety of political topics from consuming soft news.

Baum (2003b), though not disputing Prior's finding of limited factual knowledge gains in his experiments, countered—drawing on the online model of information processing (McGraw and Lodge 1995; Lodge, Steenberger, and Brau 1995)—that factual knowledge is an insufficient measure of political learning. According to this

perspective, typical individuals rapidly discard factual details regarding the objects to which they devote their attention. But they maintain an online summary evaluation of how they feel about them. Each new piece of information about a given object is tagged with a positive or negative emotional “charge.” The individual then discards the information and retains the emotional tag, which is added to his or her running tally. If a majority of the emotional tags in the running tally are positive, the individual will have a net positive summary evaluation of the object, and vice versa. Through this process, individuals can remember what they support or oppose, or like or dislike, without necessarily remembering *why*. This suggests that soft news exposure *could* lead to political learning without necessarily enhancing an individual’s capacity to recall political facts.

Parkin (2010) presented information about 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry’s position on Iraq to different groups of participants in the context of either a late night entertainment talk show (*Letterman*) or a traditional political interview show (*Face the Nation*). He finds that young, politically disinterested viewers who read the Letterman version of the transcript—that is, a transcript embedded in a webpage designed to appear like the show’s website—reported increased political engagement and demonstrated increased knowledge about Kerry’s policy positions. However, the *exact same* information presented in a traditional news context had virtually no effect on younger viewers. Parkin concludes that by making political information entertaining, soft news can at minimum supplement the political learning engendered by consuming traditional news, both directly and via the gateway effect. In a complementary study, Pfau, Houston, and Semmler (2006) also find that watching late night comedy during a political campaign increases a person’s general political “expertise” during that campaign.

In his aforementioned study, Parkin (2010) combines experimental research on exposure to *Letterman* with content analysis of particularly engaging features of the program. He demonstrates that relatively disengaged viewers not only learn and process new political information through consuming soft news, but are more able to recall this information later because of the manner in which they were exposed to it. Finally, Young (2004) notes that, *ceteris paribus*, regular viewers of the *Daily Show* are more politically knowledgeable than non-viewers.

These studies find a fairly clear link between consuming soft news and gaining political knowledge. However, other studies have found more limited and contingent effects. For instance, Brewer and Cao (2006) find that viewing late night comedy shows is associated with greater knowledge of political candidates’ biographies, but not of their policy positions. Hollander (2005), in turn, reports evidence from public opinion surveys suggesting that viewers—particularly *younger* viewers—who watch late night talk and comedy shows are more likely to recognize campaign issues if subsequently encountered, but are *not* more likely to recall political events. In other words, soft news enhances *recognition* but not *recall* of political issues.

Taken together, these findings suggest that at least *some* consumers do learn about politics via soft news, but that *what* they are learning, *how much*, and *how long lasting* remain subject to debate. Also unresolved is whether such learning influences

consumers' attitudes or behavior. It is to these questions that we now turn, beginning with the possibility of attitudinal effects.

Attitudes

For soft news to affect politics, it must first influence the attitudes of voters. After all, if any information voters glean from soft news does not influence their attitudes, then it would make little sense for politicians to court them via soft news outlets. Nor would it seem likely that such exposure would alter the substance of public policy. Some democratic theorists might applaud any increases in political knowledge and attention resulting from soft news consumption. Yet, even if consumers do increase their political attention and knowledge via soft news, such increases only matter for the state of democracy or democratic citizenship if they influence citizens' attitudes in *some* meaningful way.

In fact, some research suggests that exposure to soft news does influence the attitudes of consumers. Some of this literature focuses on the complexity and critical thinking elements of soft news—particularly its more coarse, comedic elements. For instance, Brewer and Marquardt (2007), in a detailed content analysis of 222 episodes of the *Daily Show*, find a profusion of educational content. They argue that such material increases viewers' attention to world affairs and encourages critical thinking, rather than engendering a knee-jerk cynical attitude toward political figures and institutions. Baym's (2005) analysis of the same program reaches a similar conclusion. Envisioning this form of soft news as an experiment in journalism, the author argues for its potential as a forum for deliberative democracy.

Other studies probe more deeply the causal mechanisms by which such content could actually shape the attitudes of citizens—particularly the typical soft news consumer who may not be seeking novel political information. For instance, Baum (2005) investigates survey data from the 2000 presidential election and finds that politically inattentive individuals who frequently watched daytime talk shows during the campaign were likely to find the candidates that appeared on those shows more likeable than their non-viewing counterparts. Baum and Jamison (2006) find, based on an analysis of the same election, that politically inattentive daytime talk show viewers did better than inattentive non-viewers at figuring out which candidate best represented their own interests and preferences. In both cases, the authors posit that soft news consumers arrived at their political viewpoints not by deliberation or concerted critical thinking, but incidentally, as a by-product of pursuing entertainment.

While this last finding appears somewhat hopeful from the perspective of democratic theory—as it suggests soft news can at least partially level the political information playing field—some research on political attitudes casts a darker shadow on the possible effects of soft news consumption. The findings of these studies, taken together, suggest that there may be a stark difference between the effects of watching daytime

soft news such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and those associated with watching the late night in-character comedy shows, particularly the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

For instance, Baum (2004) reports evidence from the 2000 American National Election Study that among less politically informed individuals, but not their better-informed counterparts, consuming daytime talk shows is associated with enhanced isolationism and reduced support for then-President Bill Clinton's (avowedly multilateralist) management of foreign policy. In a possibly related phenomenon, Elenbaas and De Vreese (2008) report, based on an experiment demonstrating significant possibilities for cross-cultural comparison of soft news effects, that increased exposure to soft news enhances political cynicism. Similarly, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) find that experiment-based exposure to *Daily Show* jokes about the 2000 presidential candidates led viewers to rank *both* candidates more negatively. They also found, contrary to the assertions of Brewer and Marquardt (2007), that watching this program increased subjects' cynicism about the electoral system as well as the news media.

Pease and Brewer (2008) also report experimental findings suggesting that soft news exposure enhances political cynicism. They find that while celebrity endorsements (such as Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Barack Obama) increase participants' perceptions of candidate viability, they do not increase perceptions of likeability. In other words, celebrity endorsements were largely unpersuasive to their student participants, only causing them to expect that the endorsed candidate was more likely to win.

Overall, there is little evidence that soft news causes viewers to swing to a different side of the political spectrum or to support particular policies. Yet, a main tension in the literature on the attitudinal Oprah Effect concerns how soft news shapes perceptions of the legitimacy of political institutions. While some scholars report evidence that at least some soft news should bolster a sense of enfranchisement in and an enhanced perception of overall importance of the political system, other experimental research suggests the contrary. These studies suggest that soft news may increase cynicism toward both political leaders and institutions.

Behavior

Finding that soft news influences political attention, knowledge, and even attitudes only takes us part of the way to linking soft news consumption to political outcomes. An additional intermediate step concerns mass political behavior—the fourth Oprah Effect. On this score, evidence is emerging that soft news may influence the political behavior of at least some citizens.

The most basic act of democratic citizenship is voting. It is here that scholars interested in locating soft news behavioral effects have concentrated the bulk of their investigations. Such research can be usefully divided into two questions. First, are soft news consumers differently likely to vote than comparable non-consumers? Second, are they likely to vote differently, contingent on showing up at the polling station?

Beginning with the former question, Baumgartner and Morris (2006) argue that exposure to soft news alienates viewers from the political process and thus depresses political participation. Prior (2007) also argues that soft news may depress voting, though he proposes a different causal mechanism. Rather than attributing reduced participation to disaffection, he points to an indirect media selection process. Prior argues that media fragmentation and the resulting proliferation of choices allows politically uninterested consumers to avoid political information altogether, in favor of pure entertainment. Consequently, he argues, these individuals have become less likely to vote over time. Conversely, people interested in politics are now better able to inform themselves than ever before. These individuals, he argues, are thus increasingly likely to vote. Because they are also more partisan and ideological, this alters the mix of voters who show up at the polls, leading to more polarized political outcomes. Though not a story directly *about* soft news, the inescapable implication is that greater access to entertainment media—presumably including soft news—depresses the political participation of otherwise inattentive individuals.

Other research has more directly measured the effects of soft news consumption on voting behavior, though it has not added to our knowledge on turnout. Cao and Brewer (2008) find that the one in four citizens who report learning about a campaign from political comedy shows were also more likely to attend a campaign event and to join a campaign-related organization. Similarly, in an experiment, Xenos and Becker (2009) find that exposure to political comedy shows on television is associated with various additional information-seeking behaviors, albeit only among highly politically engaged subjects.

Baum (2005), in turn, reports that not only do politically inattentive individuals who watch presidential candidates on daytime talk shows come away liking those candidates better, they also become more likely than their non-talk-show-consuming counterparts to cross party lines and vote for the opposition party candidate. This is because likeability can trump party loyalty among these relatively less partisan voters. As Bill Geddie, executive producer of *The View* (a daytime talk show that in 2008 featured presidential aspirants Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain) commented, “There have been a hundred debates, and who’s seen them? Voters operate on two fronts: ‘Do I like this person?’ and ‘Do I agree with this person?’ A talk show is the first step toward helping them decide if they like a person” (quoted in Gold 2007).

Baum and Jamison (2006) extend Lau and Redlawsk’s (1997) “correct voting” model and find that the same politically inattentive talk show consumers that Baum (2005) investigated are also more likely to vote for the candidate who best matches their own self-described preferences on public policy and values issues. This suggests that the likeability heuristic (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991) can help relatively uninformed voters figure out which candidate is likely to best represent their interests. It also suggests that the party switching identified by Baum (2005) may represent rational responses to newly gained information.

In one sense, Prior’s findings seem somewhat inconsistent with those of Baum and Baum and Jamison. Unfortunately, because Prior addresses turnout while the latter

studies address vote choice *contingent on turning out*, it is difficult to compare the two directly. Notwithstanding the aforementioned debate concerning soft news effects on attention and knowledge, it is possible that the proliferation of soft news might cause fewer politically inattentive individuals to vote, while still improving the reasoning process and accuracy of the vote choice among those who, despite their increased capacity to ignore politics, nonetheless continue to turn out.

POLITICIANS' RESPONSES TO THE FOUR OPRAH EFFECTS

Arguably, the most crucial step for research into soft news effects on politics is determining whether and to what extent soft news—via its various effects on public opinion—ultimately influences politics and public policy. One can draw inferences from effects on attention, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, on the one hand, to outcomes, on the other. Indeed, if a previously inattentive individual becomes attentive, gains new knowledge, and thus changes her opinions and subsequently her vote choice due to soft news consumption, then, if enough such individuals follow suit, candidate strategies, and perhaps electoral outcomes, might change too.

While research in this area is preliminary, suggestive evidence has emerged concerning soft news effects on the behavior of candidates, electoral outcomes, and even public policy initiatives. For instance, Popkin (2006) argues that the mix of policy issues salient to the public has changed since the advent of soft news, with the topics most often covered in soft news outlets—such as foreign crises, crime, scandal, and morality—growing increasingly salient among citizens and hence more prominent in the public policy agenda. Baum (2003, 2007), in turn, presents evidence that these salience effects are most pronounced among soft news consumers.

Popkin (2006) further characterizes democratic politicians as “crowd-seeking mis-siles” who are responsive to such changes in public priorities. He provides historical examples of politicians responding to changes in public priorities, which he argues are traceable to changes in communication technology that enhanced the political knowledge of previously marginalized citizens. Baum (2007) offers several contemporary examples in this regard. For instance, when Bush administration Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled abroad, she often arranged airport photo opportunities with local celebrities. In Tokyo she posed for photographs with a popular Japanese American sumo wrestling champion; in Romania she met with Olympic legend Nadia Comaneci. These “photo ops” were intended to attract the local media, so that they would pay more attention to the Secretary’s visit and, in so doing, transmit her messages to segments of the local population that might otherwise ignore her visit. One official predicted that Romanians would “go crazy” over the Secretary’s meeting with Comaneci (Brinkley 2005).

A second example concerns presidential communication. In the current era of fragmented media and polarized politics, presidents can no longer rely on nationally televised prime time speeches or Sunday morning talk show appearances to communicate with the public. Instead, they must increasingly tailor their messages to the sensibilities of soft news audiences, who constitute a large pool of relatively persuadable potential voters (Baum 2005; Baum and Jamison 2006).

It is therefore unsurprising that politicians court the soft news media. For instance, in a series of pre-9/11 episodes, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* covered the plight of women in autocratic countries. Following the US invasion of Afghanistan in November 2001, President Bush—presumably with an eye toward appealing to her vast, mostly female, audience—asked Oprah Winfrey to be the US special envoy to Afghanistan for women’s issues, an honor she declined.

In the run-up to the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq, in turn, the Pentagon granted coveted reporting slots “embedded” within US combat units to entertainment-oriented media outlets like MTV, *Rolling Stone*, and *People* magazine. Bryan G. Whitman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Media Operations, explained the Pentagon’s rationale: “It is a recognition that not everyone gets their news from *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*. . . . We consciously looked at those news organizations that have reach and impact and provided them with the greatest possible opportunities. . . . Each of them [embedded reporters] reach a different audience. Our goal was to dominate the information market” (quoted in Carr 2003).

During the 2000, 2004, and 2008 primary and general presidential election campaigns, virtually all candidates appeared on daytime and late night, entertainment-oriented talk shows. Consequently, many Americans who might otherwise have largely ignored the presidential campaign encountered at least *some* information about the candidates. Perhaps presaging President Obama’s September 2009 *Letterman* appearance, then-President George W. Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney appeared on the celebrity entertainment news magazine *The Insider*. This suggests even sitting presidents are now enlisting the soft news media in their efforts to persuade Americans to support their policies.

Baum (2007) offers an anecdote from the 2005 State of the Union Address that appears to substantiate Popkin’s (2006) assertion that soft news can alter the public policy agenda. In the run-up to the address, President Bush presented a major speech outlining an ambitious agenda for space exploration. The issue, however, failed to capture the public’s interest. In contrast, a second pre-address “trial balloon” focusing on steroid abuse *did* capture the public’s imagination. Consequently, at the last moment, the President substantially altered his address to drop any mention of space exploration in favor of condemning steroid abuse among professional athletes.

The President’s focus on steroid abuse paid political dividends. The nation’s sports media covered the story extensively. Taking up the President’s call to arms, Congress quickly arranged a series of high-profile hearings on the subject. These hearings, involving some of the nation’s most celebrated athletes, generated a feeding frenzy of media coverage. By focusing on steroids, the President reached a vast audience of

sports enthusiasts who might otherwise never have heard about his address. He also generated considerable post-address attention by continuing to promote the issue, even as his allies in Congress arranged public hearings on the subject. Those hearings attracted a large nationwide audience thanks to predictable media fascination with the lifestyles (and foibles) of celebrities, including star athletes.

Some scholars interpret the aforementioned patterns as suggesting a darker side to the effects of soft news on political outcomes. For instance, there is evidence of a trend in the United States toward politicians growing increasingly responsive to wealthier, more politically sophisticated citizens, at the expense of relatively less advantaged citizens (APSA 2004; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005). Since less politically engaged citizens tend to be most attentive to soft news, this implies some limitation on politicians' responsiveness to the policy preferences of soft news consumers. In the US context, this could reflect a shift either in *responsiveness to* or in the *preferences of* typical voters. Prior (2007) favors the latter explanation, arguing that the current high media choice environment brought about by cable and the Internet has effectively shifted the preferences of the median voter toward those of more politically sophisticated citizens.

Of course, citizens' political priorities are not necessarily always driven by policy preferences. Exposure to politics via soft news might also cause consumers to focus relatively more on image- or personality-centric dimensions of candidate evaluation (Baum 2003, 2005; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). This could also help account for the aforementioned shift in representation without assuming a change in overall responsiveness by politicians.

Direct evidence of soft news influencing electoral outcomes in the United States remains elusive. However, suggestive evidence has emerged in other nations. For instance, Salmond (2007) reports that parliamentary question times with rules allowing more unstructured debate tend to attract larger and less politically sophisticated audiences than those with more highly structured rules. This is because freewheeling debates are more entertaining. By changing the audience mix, in turn, question time rules also influence who turns out on Election Day. This alters electoral outcomes. Politically inattentive voters are more likely to be working class and ideologically left-of-center. Consequently, permissive question time rules lead to increased support for labor governments.

Additional research (Taniguchi 2007; *Japan Today* 2004) suggests that soft news has influenced the political fortunes of individual candidates in Japan. For instance, former Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Makiko Tanaka—daughter of former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka—built her political constituency in significant measure through repeated appearances on soft news shows. In particular, Tanaka benefited from public exposure via Japan's so-called *Wide Shows*—Japan's analog to daytime talk shows in the United States. Taniguchi finds that *Wide Show* viewers consistently rated Tanaka more positively than viewers of traditional TV news shows or newspapers.

Taniguchi argues that the types of politicians who court soft news outlets, like former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, tend to be more reform-minded. He also presents evidence that appearing on soft news increases legislators' chances of reelection.

Perhaps most importantly, Taniguchi argues that soft news changes the policy process and political outcomes in Japan. In the former case, he cites Koizumi's success in overriding strong legislative opposition to a postal reform program by reaching out to the Japanese public via appearances on *Wide Shows* and other entertainment-oriented TV programs. He argues that Japan's dominant political party, the LDP, is undergoing substantial organizational change due to the proliferation of politics into the soft news media. He further credits intensive *Wide Show* coverage of foreign policy crises—such as a diplomatic row between Japan and North Korea—with pressuring Japanese leaders to take a harder line than they would otherwise prefer.

Shirk (2007) reports evidence that similar developments are under way in China. She notes that commercialization of the media has led to more audience-appealing stories about Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. This tends to stoke popular nationalism in China, thereby complicating the government's efforts at diplomacy with those nations.

Finally, Baum (2007) notes that in Saudi Arabia the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is the nation's highest-rated English-language TV program. The show is particularly popular among young Saudi women. According to Hana Balaa, director of the TNS Female Research Center in Saudi Arabia, the popularity of *Oprah* is part of a growing trend in the region. Largely due to the availability of satellite TV, Bala notes that "Women are increasingly seeking ways to express themselves and their individuality . . . They're expressing their opinions more" (quoted in El-Rashidi 2005).

CONCLUSION

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The literature on soft news has begun to address two types of new complexity in the production and consumption of such content. First, as the market for soft news grows, the genre is becoming more diverse. In particular, the audience for late night political comedy programs like the *Daily Show* tripled from 2001 to 2005 (Xenos and Becker 2009). A subsequent surge in content analyses and experimental studies on the potential effects of such programming suggests it may differ in key respects from other soft news programming. Holbert (2005), for instance, identifies two main contrasts between satirical political comedy and more traditional soft news. That is, political satire is *primarily* political in content, rather than incidentally so, and contains few explicit statements of political fact. In contrast, when other soft news genres report on politics they do introduce new factual information.

Since the 2008 presidential election, the satirical comedy subgenre of soft news, and the scholarly attention to it, have continued to grow. It is thus possible to lose sight of the fact that this is only one of several varieties of soft news, one with a relatively ideological and sophisticated audience and so perhaps limited possibilities for shaping the behavior of politicians. Meanwhile, the more traditional soft news outlets—lighter on political content and heavier on human interest, and aiming to entertain not by

satire but by providing unchallenging fare—have continued apace, catering to consumers with relatively limited interest in politics.

What has been their effect on the political attention, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of citizens? It seems possible that these two genres might have quite distinct effects on quite different groups of consumers, as well as on politicians' strategic behavior. For instance, traditional soft news may be of most value to politically inattentive audiences and politicians seeking to persuade them, while satiric late night comedy shows may facilitate greater political learning and engagement among relatively sophisticated segments of the public.

In any case, as the soft news landscape grows larger and begins to cater not only to those with little interest in or attentiveness to politics but also to more politically attentive, ideological, and active citizens, it is important that scholars recognize the changing and potentially increasing power of soft news on the larger political landscape. It may ultimately become difficult to explain politicians' actions without an intimate knowledge of soft news content and the ways that consumers use it.

This highlights the *second* emerging complexity identified by the literature on soft news: the fragmentation of news audiences into ever smaller self-selected niches of news consumption. Not only is the content of soft news growing more varied, but so too are the ways that consumers get their news. Due to technological innovations and shifts in audience behavior, the organization of news consumption is increasingly personalized and subject to consumer preferences regarding what, when, and where they entertain themselves or expose themselves to politically themed news.

Some scholars (Xenos and Becker 2009) have speculated that these changes—particularly Internet delivery of news and filtering technologies consumers can use to set their own daily news menus—will preempt inattentive citizens' incidental political learning. Gone are the days of passive learning and incidental by-products, or so the logic goes. But so far the evidence for such a trend is limited at best. While changes in consumer technologies and habits may be dramatic, thus far scholars know relatively little about the effects of this fragmentation on consumers' political attentiveness, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Given the enormity and speed of the changes in this marketplace, as well as the potential consequences for democratic participation and the strategic landscape for politicians, this is a key area for future research.

New research on the interaction of the supply and demand sides of soft news—that is, on the ways that politicians understand and then take advantage of soft news, and in turn the ways that audiences seek or respond to the resulting content—demonstrates that soft news has become a critical arena for the playing out of the democratic process. This is taking place not only in the United States, but worldwide.

For instance, soft news may facilitate leaders' efforts to emphasize politically advantageous personal images, rather than policies (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). This may increase the extent to which, at least in some institutional contexts, politicians contest politics more along *personalistic* than *policy* dimensions (Downs 1957). Indeed, increased comparative research would lend much to the scholarly understanding of the root mechanisms at play, that is, the effects on *both* the

consumers *and* the producers of soft news—politicians and media actors alike. Politicians and potential voters have limited time and energy, and although delivered with guffaws or by sleight of hand, or packaged as inconsequential entertainment, soft news can be a serious channel of communication in the fast-moving, complex political landscapes of the present day.

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